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SUBJECT: NAJAF MACHINATIONS BEFORE SELECTION OF NEW GOVERNOR

Classified By: Senior Advisor Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Amid uncertainty over the election of the next governor, Senior Advisor for Southern Affairs Gordon Gray and Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) leader Fred Fonteneau on April 27-28 met the newly elected chairman of the Najaf Provincial Council Shaykh Fayad al-Shimmeri (State of Law) and later Assad Gelal al-Tai (ISCI), who remained the governor until factions within the Provincial Council (PC) negotiated a new selection. Fayad and the nine other PC members who circled into his office were eager for technical and development assistance from PRT Najaf, especially to improve the province's electricity and water provision. Gelal, who seemingly expected he would be reelected governor, said religious clerics are concerned about his rival candidate, Loyalty to Najaf leader Adnan al-Zurfi (who would be elected governor May 1). Both Fayad and Gelal said political uncertainty and Deputy Governor Abtan's departure are causing minor security lapses in the province. End summary.

Background

¶2. (C) PC members from Da'wa (State of Law), ISCI, and the Sadrists each had pushed their own preferred candidate for governor. In early April, Da'wa and ISCI national-level leaders struck a "grand bargain" to allocate provincial leadership jobs, according to our contact in Baghdad. This deal called for retaining the ISCI-affiliated current Governor Gelal. ISCI members in Najaf rebelled and instead demanded for governor the more stalwart Deputy Governor Abd Badir Abtan, who wields strong influence among the ISCI/Badr-dominated local police commanders. The Sadrists also pushed their own candidate, Liwa al-Sumaysim. On May 1, Adnan al-Zurfi, the Loyalty to Najaf candidate (Ministry of Interior intelligence official and former Najaf governor under the CPA), was elected governor by a majority of the new PC. The PC also selected Razaq Mohammad Sharif (Sadrist Trend) as first deputy governor and Hassan Hamza Mosa (Reform Trend) as second deputy. More on all officials to be reported septel. End background.

New Chairman Fayad Readies Priorities

¶3. (SBU) Senior Advisor Gray and PRT Najaf Team Leader Fonteneau on April 27 visited the Najaf Provincial Council building to visit the newly elected PC chairman and Da'wa party leader in Najaf, Shaykh Fayad al-Shimmeri. Nine other new PC members from all parties represented in the council also attended, including the Sadrist Trend list. Fayad said his priorities as PC Chairman will be to encourage investment and business in Najaf, continue to fight terrorism in coordination with the Iraqi Army, police and U.S. forces, and

to counter corruption. Fayad praised the PC's good relationship with PRT Najaf.

¶4. (SBU) Fayad and most other PC members cited Najaf's lack of electricity and water as the province's main problem; they roundly blamed the latter on Turkey's refusal to send more river water south and asked the U.S. to pressure Turkey on the issue. Fayad also complained that southern Iraq's suffering is in contrast to the Iraqi Kurds in the North, who take 17 percent of the federal budget. He predicted that the Independent High Electoral Commission would have to delay planned district and sub-district elections and acknowledged that Najaf's civil society organization are either weak or attached to political parties.

Gelal's Concerns about the Incoming Governor
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¶5. (C) On April 28, Senior Advisor and Team Leader visited outgoing Governor Assad Gelal al-Tai (ISCI affiliated), who clearly expected to be reelected. Gelal, referring to himself in the third person, said he was accepted as governor by Prime Minister Maliki and his Da'wa Party, the Sadrists, and the Reform Trend, but that he faced opposition within his own ISCI camp in Najaf. Gelal claimed that the marja'iyah (top religious clerics) had unspecified concerns about Loyalty to Najaf candidate Adnan al-Zurfi (who would be elected governor three days later). Gelal also expressed concern that if Zurfi was elected, Da'wa would in effect control the PC Chairmanship and governorship in Najaf because Zurfi is close to Maliki. Despite these concerns, Gelal praised provincial

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elections and the transfer of power in Najaf. All parties, except the Ba'th and Sadrists, believe in Iraq's political process, Gelal said. As evidence that Sadrists in Najaf are becoming productive, Gelal said Sadrist PC members volunteered to chair committees dealing with service provision.

Minor Security Concerns amid Political Uncertainty

¶6. (C) Political uncertainty and the non-ISCI PC members' rejection of former governor Abd Badr Abtan--who wields strong influence among the ISCI/Badr dominated local police--has raised security concerns in Najaf. According to Fayad, police commanders told him the security services have become more "relaxed" given the delay in selecting a new governor. Fayad said there has been an increase in criminal activity, but not organized militia violence. Fayad reported (and Emboffs observed) more police and Iraqi Army on Najaf's streets. Gelal complained that the Provincial Director of Police had failed to brief the PC on the recent attacks, hinted the police were complicit in the attacks, and said he has sought the Director's replacement with someone not beholden to "parties" (i.e., ISCI/Badr).

Comment

¶7. (C) Despite the minor delay in deciding on the leadership posts in Najaf, there has been little friction during the transfer of power from ISCI to Da'wa. The rejection of Gelal by local ISCI members in favor of Abtan demonstrated the loyalty the latter had gathered. Without a leadership position, however, Abtan may be inclined to stir trouble. But the attention paid to Najaf by national Shi'a leaders and local clerics probably will help temper the reaction of those who have lost influence in the province. End comment.

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